

Testimony
Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Hearing on the Commission on Black Men and Boys
Friday, September 12, 2003

The complexity of life, especially the conditions associated or linked to living with and among poverty in urban cities, can be overwhelming to youths and adults. These conditions are complicated and are expanded by the cycle of poverty, discrimination, and limited educational opportunities that teach African American males, at a very young age, lessons about learned hopelessness and learned helplessness. Some of these factors are so systemic that they go unnoticed by the policy and decision makers when they attempt to address surface manifestations and symptoms of these lessons. Since the outcry is most often triggered by an event or an action that is either unconscionable or unexpected, the tendency to create a fast solution often overshadows the need to attack the root causes with a more viable longer-termed policy, practice, or solution.

From the perspective of the author, developed through experience, education, and research, the Committee on Government Reform through the Commission on Black Men and Boys must develop effective programs or strategies that accommodate four critical factors. These factors, along with brief descriptors, are shown in Figure 1 (Success Factors) in the attached appendix, and they are as follows:

I. Preparation

In order for African American men and boys to lead productive and wholesome lives, they must be the beneficiaries of an educational system that features quality teaching, effective schools, and meaningful community support. These ingredients should provide the content for the development of self-knowledge, cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, as well as spirituality. Empowered with these types of knowledge and skill, the African American men and boys are prepared in processes that guarantee excellence, equity, and legitimacy. Thus, they can realize the transcendent nature of preparation as described by Orison Swett Marden's quote:

"The golden opportunity you are seeking is in yourself. It is not in your environment; it is not in luck or chance, or the help of others; it is in yourself alone."

II. Opportunity

In order for African American men and boys to take advantage of the options that are available in educational institutions and the work place, they must be guaranteed access and supplied with quality academic as well as cultural experiences. Educational and work environments must be adaptable to the strengths of a diverse population and demonstrate through positive attitudes and behaviors that the welcome is genuine, and the environment is supportive. Norman Vincent Peale's words are instructive for this factor:

"Any fact facing us is not as important as our attitude toward it, for that determines our success or failure."

III. Participation

In all matters socially, educationally, politically, and economically, African American men and boys, through policy and practice, must be empowered to be actively involved as valued participants. It is useful to remember the words of Henry Ford at this juncture:

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress;
working together is success.”

IV. Growth and Development

African American men and boys must be engaged continuously so that individual and collective mastery of education and cultural as well as societal competencies are expected and achieved. Napoleon Hill’s quote seems prophetic for this factor:

“Strength and growth come only through continuous effort and
struggle....”

It is the contention of the author that these brief descriptions of the four critical factors and the achievement thereof would prove to be the necessary ingredients for an appropriate and legitimate response to the effective and successful academic and workforce education of African American males. A useful example of a promising intervention is the Communities In Schools Houston, Incorporated partnership. Through an array of services and quality providers focused on client needs that connect to the four critical factors, a sampling of the results for 2002-03 is included:

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	3,387	45.91
Female	3,991	54.09

Ethnicity	Number	Percent
Black	3,194	43.29
Hispanic	3,831	51.92
White	168	2.28
Asian	75	1.02
Other	91	1.23
Multi-Ethnic	19	.26

Case Outcomes	Number Assessed	Percent Improved
Academic	3,988	68.25
Behavior	2,847	67.62
Attendance	288	51.02

School Retention	Number	Percent	Percent Promoted	Percent Retained
Stayed in School	7,077	97.12	82.10	17.90
Dropped Out	83	1.14		
Untraceable	127	1.74		

Graduation	Number	Percent
Eligible to Graduate	415	
Traceable	400	
Graduated		96.39

College Aspirations	Number
No College Plans	29
Plans to Apply	104
Completed Admission Test	27
Admitted	170

This is but one example of effective programming that has some useful elements for addressing the systemic barriers that prevent some African American males from becoming or continuing to be productive, prosperous, and proud citizens. However, one must be careful not to lose the uniqueness of individual African American men and boys when focusing on the collective population. Thus, this testimony encourages the use of flexible policies, practices, and solutions that can be customized according to the specific needs of individual African American males.

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